



KNUT HAMSON

THE WILD CHORUS

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THE WILD CHORUS

Translated with an introduction by
PETER DAHLSTRAND

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FOREWORD BY KNUT HAMSON

My Dear Doctor!

The poems I have published make for only a small book, and perhaps they are not the best I've written, I do not know. Later, I will put out other collections, I have a great many verses.

I do, however, find it disrespectful to my readers to publish early drafts and loose poetic sketches as finished poems.

Every poet knows that poems come about under a stronger or weaker pressure of mood. A sound buzzes in us, colors glow, there is the feeling of something inside trickling. It depends on how long this state of mind lasts. It has happened for me — in good moments — that before I have finished a verse the next one has begun to flow; I must then skip the half-finished verse, and begin with the new one further down on the page, and there is often only a single line here and there, which does not seem to follow the broader current.

But why would I publish such a less than perfect draft? It would satisfy neither myself nor the readers. So it is that I have a lot of poems that cannot be published until their form is improved.

I do not know how the great lyricists are working; their poems perhaps emerge completely finished and without mistakes at the instant a mood strikes them. I only wish to tell you, my dear Doctor, how my own verses have come about.

Incidentally, there is no major difference in my way of working with prose or poetry. A great part of what I wrote was penned at night after having slept a few hours and then awakening. I am at such moments clear-minded and extremely sensitive. I always have paper and a pencil beside my bed. I do not turn on the light, but begin to write in the dark when I feel something begin to flow. It has become a habit, and it is not difficult for me to understand my papers in the morning.

I do not wish to give you the impression of anything mystical in the development of my poems. That I am best writing in the dark at night is a sort of bad habit which began long ago when I had no light to turn on and was forced to make do. There is nothing mystical and nothing "ingenious" about it. The truly great poets probably have their own methods, which are different from mine.

The summer is the most productive time for me. Many poems come about when I lie on my back in the forest. I try to get away from people and keep the memories of modern life far away, and I commit myself to those days of my childhood when I wandered about and cared for the animals at home. My feeling for nature — if such a thing is possible — came alive during that early childhood on the

grasslands, in the woods, and in the mountains, and there I met the many animals and birds that have become my lifelong friends. Since the age of four the sea was also a part of the natural environment I grew up alongside. My home was on the Westfjord, and this fjord opens directly into the Atlantic Ocean.

Reports from the explorers on their explorations are my favorite reading. These people are not as skilled as professional poets with the adjectives they choose, yet they tell me so much. When I sometimes read descriptions of nature in modern novels, I am filled with disgust; I quickly see theirs is merely a somewhat learned knowledge of nature, influenced by some observation made on the spot, and not an inner and sacred empathy with the forest and its vastness.

Winter is for me the hardest time. I do not love the snow, the sight of it torments me, and I understand nothing but its deep and unnatural emptiness. I once wrote a long epic poem about winter at Christmas time. But, sadly, it was not a success, although it was illustrated by one of our foremost artists.

If something happens in winter that reminds me of the summer, I always feel happiness and contentment. Rain falling upon the snow as a change in the weather, the chirping of a little bird in a tree, or the passing scent of a flower blossom, each put me under a spell for a while; sometimes, when a fly buzzes in the window, a pang of joy passes through me in memory of the summer, now hidden beneath the snow.

Spring begins to take hold of me in February or March. The days are then clear again, one is given new hope, and the verses begin to come. So many more poems are there ready and waiting to be finished.

This is, Doctor, what I can tell you about my poetry. Use these remarks as you wish, whether your plan is to translate them, or just to quote from the useful parts when you write your introduction.

Sincerely,

KNUT HAMSON

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

The Wild Chorus [*Det vilde Kor*] was the only book of poetry Knut Hamsun published during his lifetime. Its 1904 publication concluded a ten year period in which Hamsun mostly turned away from the novel, producing instead four plays, a verse drama, and a travelogue of the Far East.

These were restless and tumultuous years both personally and creatively and he traveled widely, with stays in Copenhagen, Oslo, Paris, and Munich; a long trip through Finland, Russia and the Orient; and finally a return to his birthplace in the rural North of Norway.

The majority of the poems in this collection were written around the time of Hamsun's doomed 1898 marriage to Bergljot Bech Goepfert. Their relationship, begun two years earlier while Bergljot was married to her first husband, drew the ire of a woman named Anna Munch, who had been stalking Hamsun since 1891. Munch sent anonymous poison-pen letters to everyone associated with Hamsun and Bergljot, from family members to owners of cafes they frequented, describing him as a dissolute seducer of wealthy married women, and an idler who was not even the author of his own books.

Ironically, both Bergljot's father and the police came to suspect Hamsun of the letter writing in an effort to bring about Bergljot's divorce and then, later, to avoid marrying her after he had changed his mind. By then Hamsun had indeed changed his mind but was compelled to marry to disprove the lies written about him and put to an end Munch's campaign.

In the months following the wedding Hamsun quickly wrote the novella *Victoria*, but thereafter unhappiness set in for the couple and for the next four years Hamsun published nothing. In late 1898 Hamsun wrote to a friend: "I am tired of the novel, and I have always despised drama, I have begun writing poetry, the only form of writing that is not both pretentious and meaningless, only meaningless." Struggling to write, he traveled to his childhood home at Hamarøy which he had not seen in twenty five years. There Hamsun lived in a turf hut and completed the verse drama *Friar Vendt*, with the Nordland fjords, forests, and seasons providing inspiration for his poetry.

The natural world, though impartial, appears throughout these poems as a consoling force to be given gratitude in life ("Let Spring Sound Out Over the Earth") as well as in death ("My Grave", "Autumn Day"). Nature Hamsun experiences alone with his impressions taking the form of fleeting, lyrical effusions, mystical and pantheistic.

The best known of these nature poems is "The Skerry," where, using the Norwegian folk song form *stev*, the reader is transported in a sort of Norse funeral boat ride towards a flower covered island to the sound of thunder. Other experiments with meter and stanza heighten the lyrical effect of the poems, and parallel the music of nature they invoke: from the forest "soughing in the night" to its silences, the

creaking fir trees, falling spruce needles, the howling of the wind, the kinking of sun burnt stalks, and the sea crashing against the rocks.

Perhaps fittingly, given his marital troubles, “With Red Roses” begins the book with a man on his knees, begging his estranged lover to remember the good times. Nearly a third of the poems address some aspect of love, from seduction, lust, anticipation and separation, to the longing of an aged virgin (“The Old Spinster”). Bergljot herself appears as “Alvilde” in “Fever Poem,” an anguished, multi-part epic in which Hamsun alternates between scenes from their relationship and questions about why he was given life, before ending on hesitantly optimistic note.

With little money coming in from his writing, Hamsun in 1901 secretly gambled and lost his wife’s inheritance in the casinos. He then borrowed money from friends to replenish her account, but foolishly gambled that away as well. Heavy drinking further compounded his inability to write, with self-recrimination and guilt providing the impetus for “From the Arches” and the renowned poem “In One Hundred Years All Is Forgotten,” a rejection of his fame, his writing and of life itself.

Other poems are purely didactic, from his questioning of the origins of sexual desire in “The Sigh of Creation” to a comparison of Christianity and Islam in “A Consideration.” “Letter to Byron in Heaven” remains controversial for its attack on feminism, progress and democracy.

Although *The Wild Chorus* sold nowhere near enough copies to satisfy Hamsun’s gambling debts, the critical response upon publication was generally positive and the initial print run sold quickly. In Norway the book inspired a revival of lyric poetry on the subjects of love and nature in the work of the poets Herman Wildenvey (1886-1959) and Olaf Bull (1883-1933). To this day these poems continue to be read and have been set to music and sung by folk and opera singers. Though more than one hundred years have now passed, these poems have not been forgotten.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

This translation is based on the first edition of *Det vilde Kor* published by Gyldendal in 1904. A year after its publication, Norway seceded from Sweden and in 1907 a state program legislated changes to written Norwegian to eliminate Danish and Swedish influence.

For the publication of his *Collected Works* in 1916, Hamsun made extensive revisions to all his books to reflect these changes to the national idiom. A transition from soft to hard consonants, and the elimination of capitalized nouns and the Danish “aa” in spelling, were the main elements of the reform.

Some critics suggested that his revisions of *The Wild Chorus* went far beyond an update of the old Dano-Norwegian orthography and had damaged the book. Indeed, in addition to changes to the poems themselves, the first *Collected Works* edition reordered the poems, with “From the Arches” eliminated and thirteen new poems added. Subsequent editions of the collection published as *Poems* (*Dikte*, 1921), *Wild Chorus* (*Vilde Kor*, 1927), and later *Collected Works* editions, retain these 1916 revisions.

Many of the forty-nine poems in the first edition were published previously in newspapers and magazines, with some drawn from his plays. “Fever Poem” is likely the oldest in the book, with an early version appearing in the journal *Tidssignaler* in 1895.

The poems “Tora’s Song,” “Song of the Wild Celery Seeker,” “Capstan Shanty,” and “The Words of Svend Herlufsen” were taken from Hamsun’s verse drama *Friar Vendt* (1902). Parts of “In the Spring of Youth” appear in the poem “To Bergljot,” an engagement gift to his first wife. The famous “Bjørnson” was presented to the Norwegian author on the occasion of his 70th birthday in 1902. The first stanza of “The Mandrake” appeared as an epigraph to Hamsun’s play *Queen Tamara* (1903). “Evening Glow” takes its title and subject matter from the third play of Hamsun’s *Kareno* trilogy, *Aftenrøde* (1898).

The “Foreword by Knut Hamsun” is a letter written to the German translator of his poems, Heinrich Goebel. It appeared in the German language edition of the poems, *Das Sausen des Waldes*, Leipzig, 1909, and its German to English translation here is my own. Hamsun’s original letter written in Norwegian has been lost.

FEVER POEM

I

I find myself rushing,
to the crossroads of everything I am led,
of her, of earth and God.
To herself she opened the door,
A farewell then said, —
she was gone, nothing more.

II

Now autumn comes over the Lord's land,
days sunless, oppressive, black,
Life gives and takes back,
all comes to naught in the chorus of the damned.
But man lives so long.

Now gathered at the house and in the barn heaped
The grasses and grains are cut, the harvest resumed,
The leaves fall, everything is consumed,
by death's roar overwhelmed in defeat.
But man lives so long.

III

May God punish you, Alvilde,
my passion you snuffed out,
your word you took back,
and so cruelly led me about.
Once more the road for me is long,
without sun and without song.
May God punish you, Alvilde.

May God uplift you, Alvilde,
Giving thanks for our time.
You called me your boy,
so many names you made mine.

Your hand and mouth you offered me,
for a moment you and I would together be.
May God uplift you, Alvilde.

IV

Listen here, what is this silent dread
now slipping into my senses unsaid,
that through the whites of my eyes does sneer,
that leaves my mouth pale and contorted in this way?
At the wellspring of fate, is that where I drunkenly lay?
O God, inside me such a world of madness and fear.

V

For some time I sit and don't know what to say:
The grain is cut and the leaves fall, but why is it thus?
Why does the life of summer disintegrate into dust?
Why does grass grow if it is only to decay?
I go on thinking in this way.

Grain exists so that man's hunger is allayed
and grass turns green so that it may wither to hay.
And the grove's leaves from the hot sun provide shade.
But why should I scatter seeds of joy, I say,
If in the end I am only to pass away?

I cried out and demanded of the foaming sea;
to the forests and mountains and rushes near,
to the stones and storms and vast heavens I made my plea,
and to anything able to hear:
Why was I born into this life here?

But the heavens and storms and stones said nothing to me.

VI

Alvilde, I remember that last night,
You shouted: Kneel!

I drank from your shoe
Everyone laughed, even you.
I did it just for the pleasure you would feel.

Alvilde, then you held out a flower.
But I continued out.
The look you gave me
stung pleasantly.
I went homeward in the darkness, stumbling about.

VII

Now the autumnal wind is howling
like a rain soaked hound against my windows,
a chill trickles through my veins
colder than the wind outside blows.
There is released within me
the stench of a poisonous flower in bloom,
and the odor moves like a breath
lingering on in my nostrils.
It sprouts from the garden of hatred.

It is boiling, it is boiling. I try
in vain to fall asleep,
I hear the flag line's neverending
banging against the pole,
the creaking of doors, a sneaking about
on tiptoe, there are footsteps in the hall,
my heart suddenly pounds
like the baying of a hell hound.
It is boiling, boiling, boiling.

VIII

Alvilde, get my cloak and my cap with the feather on top,
I have decided to go out on a ride.
Hold the stirrups steady, slave, while I climb atop
and then run on foot at my side.

I go to seek out and examine these winds so strong
that blow over the mountains wide,
it is me on horseback, it is me galloping along
and you running like a dog at my side.

Hey now, keep the pace, I tell you I am in a rush,
Riding on a tour of my kingdom this day.
Then you collapse, Alvilde, so I bind you tightly thus —
Dear God, the girl will die if I ride on in this way.

IX

It is boiling, it is boiling, this weather and wind.
Then a knocking I hear, but from where?
Come in!
But outside the door no one is there.

I see the first day of creation,
the smoking newborn world,
I myself am alive.
Appearing at the Earth's outermost limit,
from the clouds looking down over all that was created,
an expressionless face
I ask when in my life did I lay in darkness?
Onward, my blood horse, I ride as on an anvil,
I am made of red bricks, red as blood,
I have eaten the yellow lining of my hat.
Say, isn't that a knocking at the door?

That fog I see, is it the land of the dead?
There is a lifeless sea out there
and in the middle of the sea an island born blind:
it is the land of the dead.
I come, I spread out my arms
and sink with you evermore

X

Many days have gone by, and the days they quickly pass.

My soul is cold and tough and remade
with the spring the autumn gale did fade.
I no longer complain, I nod silently and smile to the last.

Why allow sorrow to rumble down the hills like boulders,
stopping a wayfaring soul from moving on?
With this defiant heel I stomp upon
that sorrow I have no place for on my good, old shoulders.

I wander into the woods, a ruler without lands or people,
an elevated spirit, a bent man,
a fallen foot, a clenched hand,
and with my sword salute myself as my conqueror's equal.

But late at night I sit and hear the scythes being honed
and footsteps upon the earth are near.
In the faraway clouds a face does appear.
From some wasteland, an organ's last, long mass is intoned.

THE SKERRY

The boat glides now
towards a skerry,
an isle in the sea
with luxuriant shores.
Flowers grow there
never before seen,
they stand like strangers
and watch me moor.

My heart has become
a fabulous garden
with flowers like these
on the island now.
They talk with one another
and whisper strangely,
like children meeting
with laughter and bows.

Perhaps I was here
at the dawn of time
as a white Spiraea
waiting to be found.
I know that fragrance
from long ago,
it makes me tremble,
that memory profound.

I close my eyes,
the recollection fades
my head onto
my shoulder falls.
The night is thickening
over the island,
the sea is thundering —
Nirvana's thunder calls.

IN ONE HUNDRED YEARS ALL IS FORGOTTEN

Tonight I'm adrift, conflicted, and in doubt,
I feel like a capsized boat,
and for all I suffer and moan about
I have found no antidote.

But why should I feel so rotten?
In one hundred years all is forgotten.

I sing songs and prance about in pride
and live my life as a beautiful novel.
Like a full-grown troll I eat at God's side
and drink like the Devil's apostle.

And why not live a life so misbegotten?
In one hundred years all is forgotten.

It is best to end this struggle without delay
and to the sea with my tormented soul I will head.
There the world will find me one day
by the bitterest of drownings dead.

But why come to an end so ill-gotten?
In one hundred years all is forgotten.

No, it is better to wander on and stay alive
and write a new book every year
and for the noblest lines continue to strive
until I die a writer of great revere.

If that's all there is, where then do I begin:
In one hundred years all is forgotten.

MY GRAVE

No, dear God, do not let me be deceased
under blankets and sheets
and at my bedside all that crying.
Let me be struck down one day unexpected
and fall in the forest someplace neglected,
where no one can find me will I lay dying.

As a son of the forest who knows it well,
it will not deny my humble request to dwell
at long last upon some mossy mound.
There will I give back to all its animals thus,
my great corpse without speeches or fuss,
and by the crows, the rats and flies so found.

Yes, I will host a grand meal when I am deceased
for those beaks and claws and teeth a feast,
for one and all a generous serving.
And from above a squirrel will look on askance
watching with eyes alert from his branch,
almost human eyes, so unnerving.

An ample portion for each to feed,
enough to satisfy an army in need
and at the table they will pick me apart.
An eagle to strip my bones bare,
staying until no more is there,
and then with talons drawn in depart.

And into late evening and all night long
the glorious sounds of a corpse in song
as lovely as when bells are rung.
Then in tribute to me a final word,
from the owl herself it is heard,
hooted as a simple oath is sung.

When the little left of me the earth receives
and at dawn is hidden under a grave of leaves,

the end of this joyous night will be near.
My friends! I have fed you all! Goodbye!
— But all these leaves about me, why?
It must be the wind that swept them here.

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